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### Sears, Roebuck and Company, 50 Years in Memphis, 1977

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# 50 Years In Memphis





# Sears Celebrates Fifty Years In Memphis



Richard W. Sears

A jeweler in North Redwood, Minnesota received a case of time pieces he had not ordered, could not sell, and did not want. This was in 1886 and the railroad agent who handled the shipment, a young man named Richard Sears, sold the watches himself for a commission, with no idea of the impact he was to have on the merchandising industry. Business flourished, forcing him to advertise for a watchmaker to do repairs and Alvah Roebuck was one of those who answered his ad. These two men eventually became partners in a new venture called Sears, Roebuck and Co.



Alvah C. Roebuck



This little railroad station in North Redwood, Minnesota was the birthplace of Sears, Roebuck and Company. It burned in 1961.

In 1906 Sears moved into the Chicago plant, which at that time was the largest building in the world in terms of floor space, and by 1910 he had opened two branch mail order plants in strategic locations over the country, one in Seattle, Washington in 1910 and one in Dallas, Texas in 1912. Other plants were opened in Philadelphia, Pa., 1920, Kansas City, Mo., 1925, Atlanta, Ga., 1926, Los Angeles, Ca., 1927, and the search for an eighth location brought Sears to the Mid-South.

The year was 1927, the first successful television transmission took place from Washington, D.C. to Manhattan, N.Y., Charles Lindbergh flew the "Spirit of St. Louis" from Long Island, N.Y. to Paris, France, and the first all-talking motion picture was released starring Al Jolson. The world was facing a rapidly changing future and here in Memphis a new landmark appeared to become a part of this changing society.

## Silence Is Golden

A mysterious phone call to the office of E.O. Bailey and Company, a confidential meeting at the Peabody Hotel, and a wild taxi ride by several Sears executives began the history of Sears in Memphis and the mid-south.

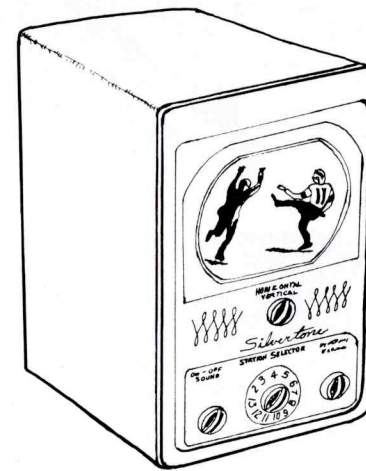
Mr. Bailey was told that the company had planned to build in another Southern city, but due to a "leak" land prices had skyrocketed, and now Memphis was being considered. They wanted to see what property he had to offer, and told him, "You go in your car, we'll follow in a cab, and when you pass a likely site slow down real slow."

Bailey showed them several places, including the old Southern yards, and as an afterthought, he drove past the location on Cleveland which was then a narrow lane north from Poplar and not opened all the way into Watkins.

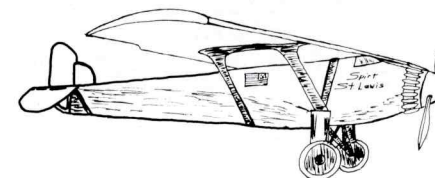
The Southern yards was the first choice but since no one could act for the railroad without authority from the Board of Directors, which was not to meet for another month, the present site was selected. Time was of the essence because another "leak" could occur.

On January 29, 1927, twelve acres of property was purchased in three pieces, totaling \$85,800. The transaction was completed and immediately things began to happen.

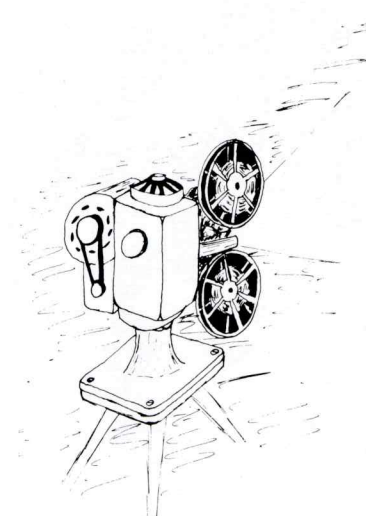
Early in February, the B&W Construction Company secured a building permit to erect a ten-story reinforced concrete structure facing what would later become Watkins Street. The first shovelful of dirt was turned by Memphis Mayor Rowlette Paine on February 22, Washington's birthday, marking the actual beginning of construction. Just four days later men began pouring concrete, and it took only 53 days to pour all that was needed for this huge building. This was believed by



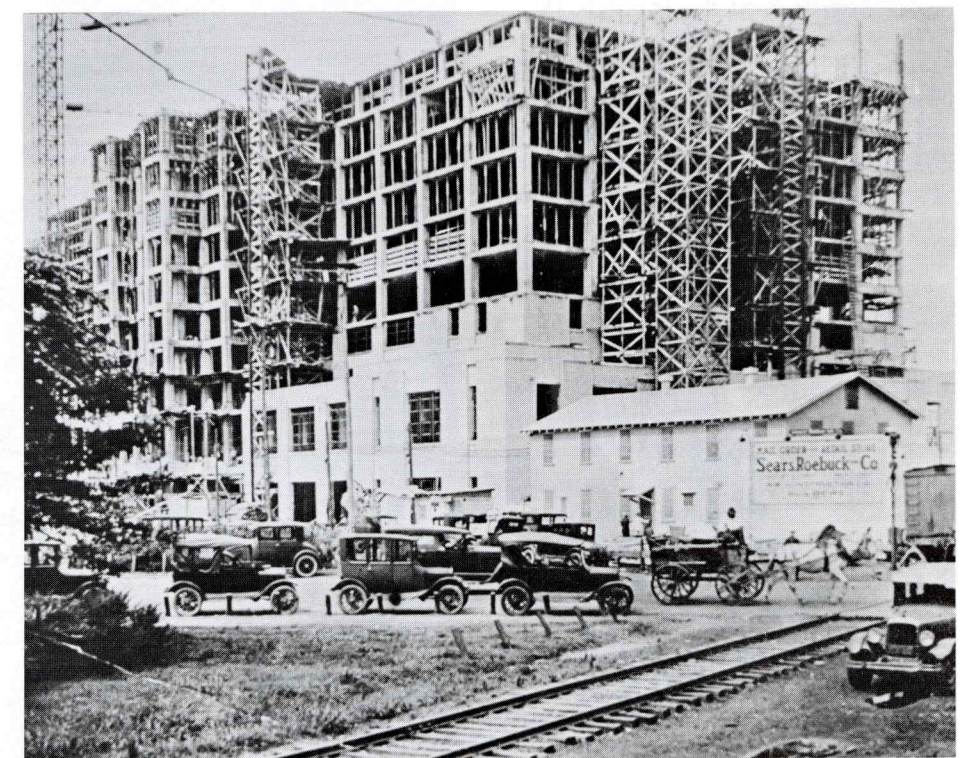
The first television broadcast was in 1927.



New York to Paris in 33 hrs. 29 min. 30 sec.



Talking pictures were here to stay.



Construction crews built 650,000 square feet of floor space in six months in 1927, compared to approximately twenty six months to build the Meyers Street Annex with 777,600 square feet, completed in 1972.



construction men to be a record in the country. The building contained more than 650,000 square feet (15 acres) of floor space with ten stories and a tower which reached into the sky a distance equal to eighteen stories.

It was completed and turned over to the Company ready for operation in practically every detail three weeks ahead of schedule, a total construction time of 180 days. This was done in spite of rain which fell every day for six weeks.

At the peak of construction there were 2,000 men employed, working day and night, stopping only from Saturday midnight until Sunday midnight.

Not only was the B&W Construction Company moving fast and furious, the city of Memphis played their part too. Just two weeks before our front doors were to open for business the street was still not paved, but on August 26 the street had been completed and the Crosstown streetcar made its first trip. Mayor Paine was the motorman and he was accompanied by other city officials, business men, and executives of Sears.

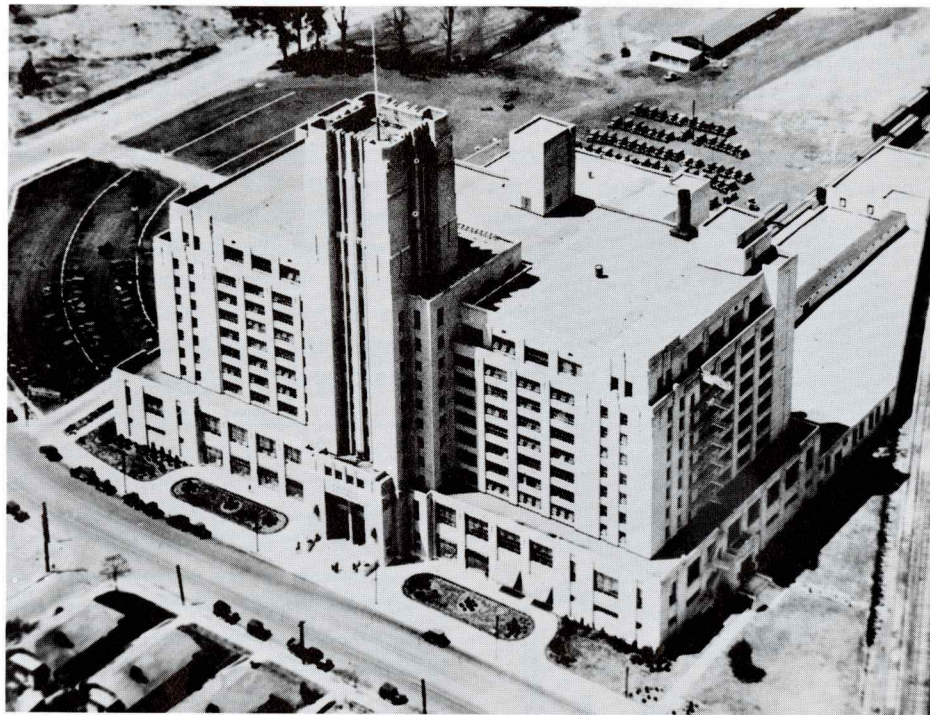
## Everything Ready

It was Saturday, August 27, 1927, the construction crew had put away their tools, customers were lined up in numbers and waiting, everything was ready in the giant new building. The landscaping, stocking, organizing and every detail was completed and ready in both Retail and Mail Order.

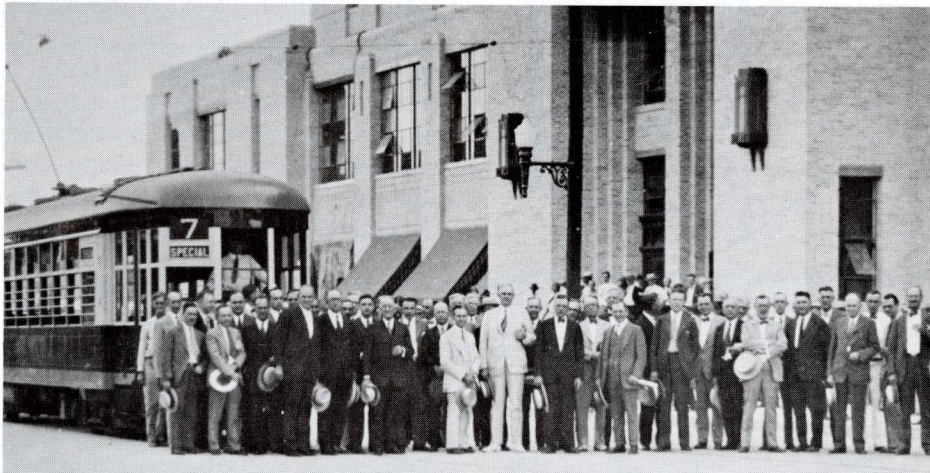
No expense had been spared in making this plant an attractive asset to the community. The great tower was lighted at night with a series of flood lights, made up of 240 lamps of 500 watts each. From a distance it looked like a giant torch pointing into the sky.

## The Doors Open

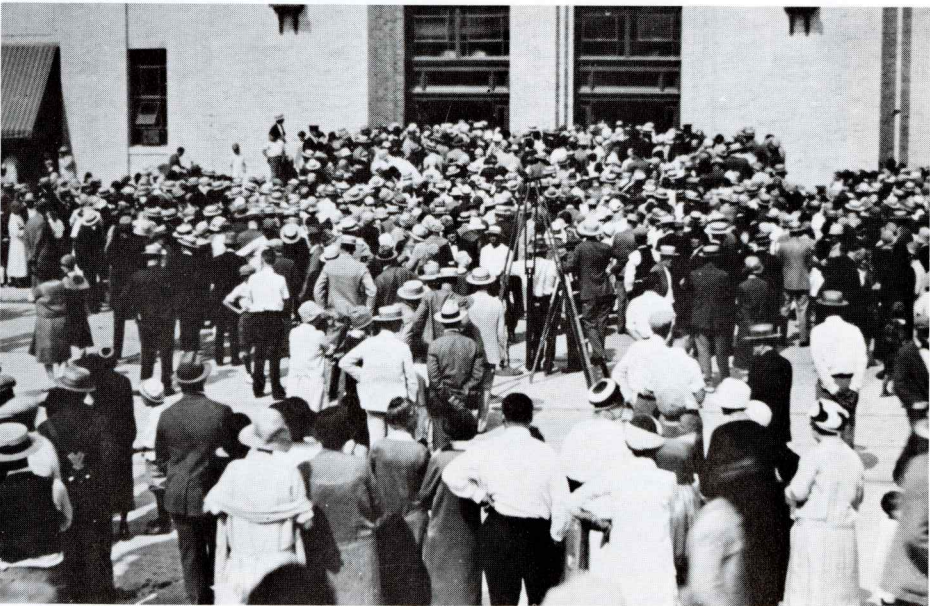
WMC radio went on the air at 9:00 AM to broadcast the gala opening ceremonies. During that day 47,000 people passed through our front



The completed building was a masterpiece of its day.



City officials and Sears executives were on hand to greet the opening of the street car line from downtown to Sears.



Styles of the day were on display as hundreds attended the opening ceremonies.

doors to inspect and make purchases. The Chairman of the Board of Sears, Julius Rosenwald, along with General R.E. Wood, then vice president of the Company attended the opening. W.L. Acroyd was General Manager, E.H. Lueck, Operating Superintendent, P.F. Kerrigan, Merchandise Superintendent, and Warren Schreiner, Manager of the retail store. The city of Memphis sent Mayor Paine and other city officials to assist in the opening ceremonies.

At least 1,000 Memphis citizens were employed in the retail and mail order stores. Now, people living in seven states in the mid-south could order and receive rapid service from Sears mail order in Memphis, or they could shop in our retail store. A whole new shopping world was open to them.

For the benefit of employees the plant contained a complete hospital, down to the last detail, operated by Miss Ruby Bringle, graduate nurse. There were laboratories, emergency operating tables, a four bed ward, and the latest devices for making diagnoses of all kinds.

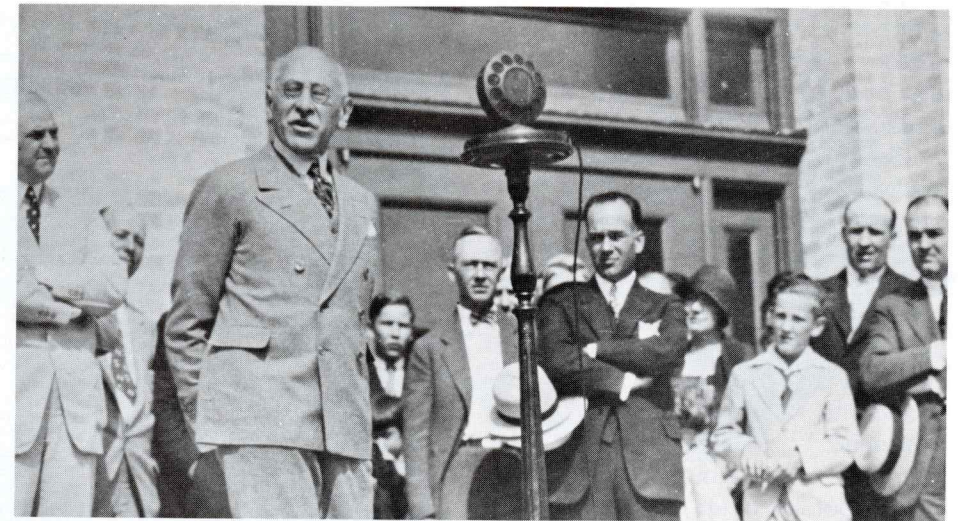
Although the hospital was principally for workers the nurse would see customers in emergencies.

A modern cafeteria was installed and employees were able to secure lunches at cost. The kitchen was equipped with the most modern machinery, such as electric dishwashers, sterilizers, steam tables and other up-to-date equipment for the rapid and safe handling of food.

## On The Move

Early in 1928, less than one year after opening, plans were made to enlarge the young mail order plant. "Our business here has grown so far beyond our expectations that we are being forced to increase the size of our building. In the new catalog the printed prices include postage on mailable articles and we expect this to increase the volume of our business considerably," declared Mr. Acroyd.

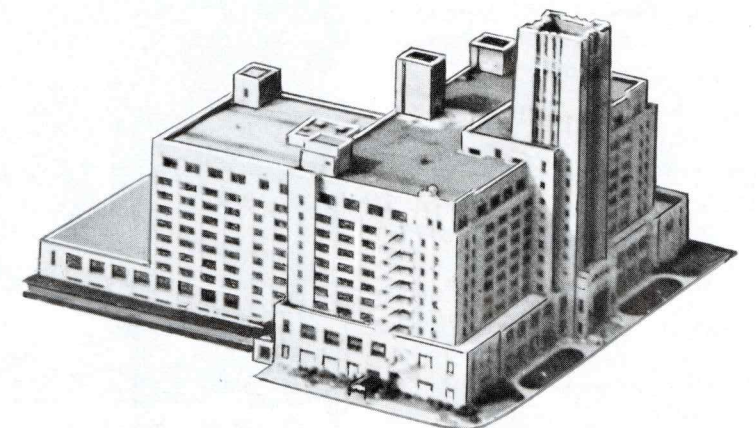
One year later, and just two years after opening, a new section of eight floors was completed above the shipping room increasing the floor



Philanthropist and Chairman of the Board, Julius Rosenwald made the opening remarks.



The heavy line shows the portions of the seven states within the Memphis area.



The building as it appeared after the 1929 addition.



space by 25%. Sears had found its stride in Memphis with enthusiasm and confidence, giving birth to the slogan, "Memphis Leads The Way."

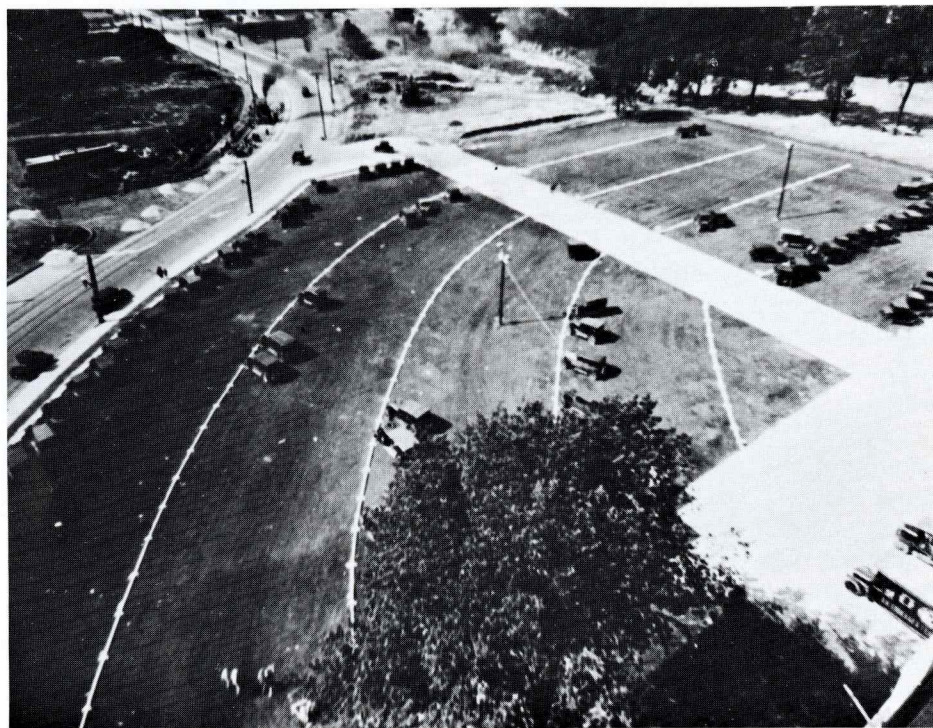
Some will remember the stock market crash in 1929, and the depression which followed. The company made every effort possible to keep employes on payroll during that time. Our employes pledged one day's salary for relief work which the company matched dollar for dollar during the depression period. The continued growth of Sears in Memphis was attributed to the capable leadership of Mr. Acroyd and the many dedicated employes, who willingly contributed their talents, ideas and energies to advance Sears in Memphis. Sears recorded an increase of more than \$3,000,000 in 1929 despite the market crash. That is the year our company negotiated with J.C. Penney on a possible merger, which as we know now, never took place.

The following year, 1930, several changes were made which affected Sears employes. In July the company adopted the 13-month year, which divided the year into 13 months of 28 days each. The change was made to afford a better basis for comparison of sales and earnings. It also made payroll and bookkeeping much simpler.

The 13-month plan made it possible to reduce to a 5-day work week for the mail order plant and 5½ days for the retail store. This plan was changed in later years in favor of the present system.

Sears had, by this time, gained a highly respected place in the community. Mr. Acroyd and his staff served on many community projects in responsible positions. They were active in the Chamber of Commerce, Relief Work, Community Chest, Y.M.C.A. activities, and other civic-minded organizations.

During the following years there were many changes to improve the operations and provide better and more pleasant working conditions. One of the most prominent improvements was the change from coal to gas. The country's longest smoke stack (357 feet) which ran horizontally from the boiler room at the back



*This is a view from the roof facing south prior to the construction of the Service Station.*

of the building through a tunnel to the main part of the building, and to the roof, bowed out of the picture. The notable result was that the new piped-in fuel allowed both winter heating and summer cooling.

In 1936 the Credit Union was opened, giving Sears employes a place for savings and low cost loans. Its growth during the past forty years has proven its usefulness to Memphis. We now have four employes in the Credit Union, including a full-time manager, and approximately 38 Sears employes serving as directors and on various committees.

In December of '36 Sears opened

a modern service station for the convenience of our customers. This made it possible for them to get just about everything except groceries in one stop at Sears. The next year, another addition to the mail order plant was necessary to accommodate the expanding business. This was truly an indication of how Sears in Memphis had weathered the storm of depression. The addition this time was eight stories plus a full three story section enlarging the floor area through the tenth floor and adding the new shipping room.

Important in the progress of the Memphis plant was the beginning of



*Our modern service station could handle tune-ups as well as many more major service problems.*

the Order Office program in 1939. People were moving to the cities and the Sears Catalog was mainly a rural means of selling, so the "direct mail" began to decline. Order Offices were located in small towns to turn the tide and move the business trend upward again. The catalog was also altered, taking out some farm equipment and replacing it with yard tools, garden tools, etc., for city life. These offices started what has become a major factor in the success of our company.

Business growth made it necessary to build another addition to the plant in 1941. It was a three story extension adding 60,000 square feet of floor space. This year also saw an enlarged paved area for employe parking, and a new carpenter shop and garage.

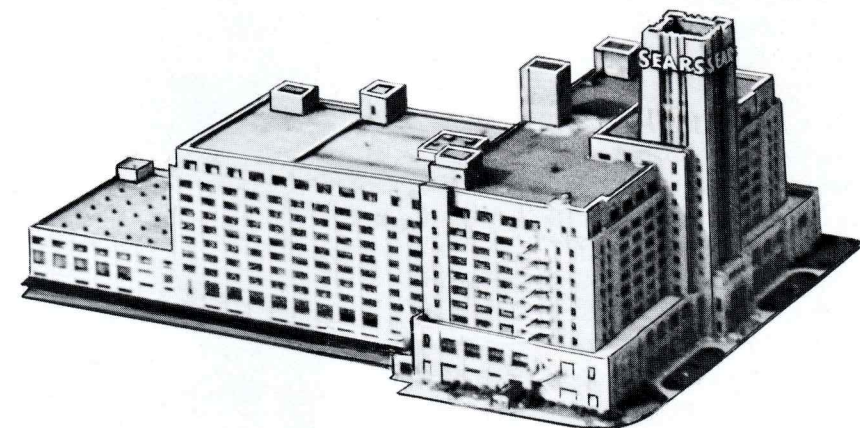
Again the country, and Sears, was in for troubled times as World War II broke out. Hundreds of men and women left to serve their country in the Army, Air Force, Navy, Marine Corps and Coast Guard. A Newsletter was published to keep these men informed of events back home and details of what other men in service were doing. The war ended and many returned to Sears and continued their career.

In June, 1945, the first issue of The Conveyor was published by Department 131-M, and the new Farm store was opened on Watkins street.

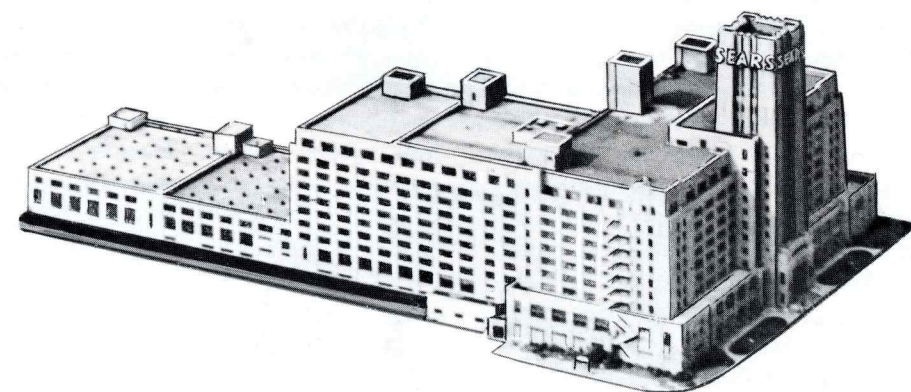
During this time, plans were being made for the Broad Street Annex and construction began the following year. Mr. Acroyd operated the excavator to remove the first load of dirt and the building was completed in 1947 with approximately 207,000 square feet of floor space.

For twenty years the streetcar had been carrying customers back and forth between downtown and Sears on Watkins. Progress was about to take its toll again as Memphis began replacing these old cars with rubber-tired electric trolleys. The tracks were taken up and streetcars became a part of history.

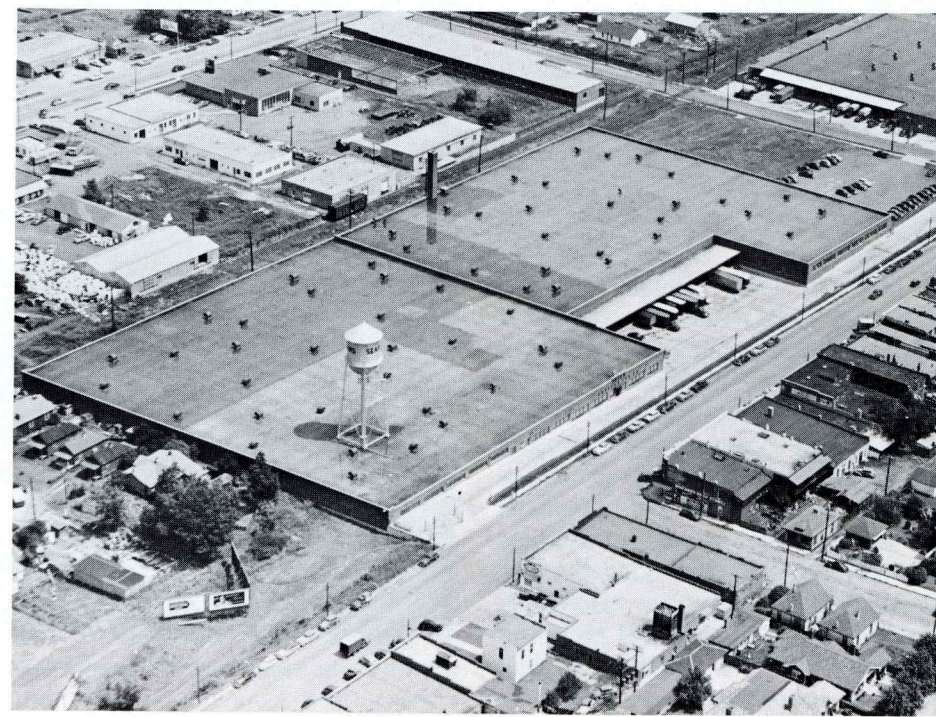
Between 1948 and 1952, the Group Hospitalization Plan was changed to give the employe much better coverage; a program was launched called "Operation Q",



*The plant as it appeared after the 1937 addition.*



*Business continues to grow and the building gets larger as shown in this 1941 photo.*



*The Broad Street Annex was the first Catalog Order Annex to be built in Memphis.*



causing 7,512 suggestions to be submitted in a four week period. There was a period here when Memphis enjoyed a 15-7/10 inch snow.

Mr. Acroyd retired in January, 1952, after 42 years service, the last 25 as General Manager here in Memphis.

The new General Manager, Alfred I. Davies, was on hand to take over, and Mr. Acroyd's words "I'm leaving the department in good hands; Mr. Davies is well qualified", were quickly confirmed.

The relationship between Sears and Memphis continued to be outstanding as Mr. Davies kept up the tradition of community involvement. At a meeting of civic and community leaders in February, 1952, someone asked how Sears would promote the Red Cross drive. "Promote it?" a Sears representative asked. "You evidently don't know our employees. As soon as they know what is needed, they take matters into their own hands. We have no problem at all."

It was in 1952 that Martha Dean, D/134, became the first woman to represent Memphis in Chicago as Profit Sharing Delegate.

Julius Rosenwald was elected to the Merchandise Mart Hall of Fame in Chicago in 1954, based largely on the important contributions he made toward lowering the cost of consumer goods while at the same time vastly improving its quality.

Mr. Davies was chosen to head a membership appeal drive for support of the educational television station, channel 10. He remained active in the affairs of that station in the following years.

In April, 1954, a Retail store was opened on South Third Street here in Memphis. This same year, Mr. W. L. Acroyd died.

Sears, Roebuck and Company had come a long way since August 27, 1927. Mr. Davies once expressed the sentiments of many with the statement, "I overheard a stockman explain to a friend of his that Sears was one big family. Up to the present time, I have found no better description, and when we stop and think of our years of service, either few or many, and the many friend-



An employee benefit we often-times forget is the free out-of-weather parking (except for the fourth floor.)

ships that we have built during our service, we can appreciate how true his comments were." Most of the changes which took place for the next few years were internal plant changes, with the possible exception of the Allstate Center which opened in the Park Plaza Shopping Center.

In 1960, Mr. Davies was transferred to Chicago where he became a Vice President in the Company. Relieving him here was

W. C. Mieher who remained in this position until his retirement in August, 1967. Mr. Mieher followed the high standards his predecessors had established and served with vigor in community affairs. During his years of leadership, we saw the construction of a five-level parking garage with a total capacity of 1,114 cars opened on the parking lot immediately south of the plant. Unlike other parking garages, this one was free and had



The new brick stands out here with the Memphis skyline in the background.

no time limits. Two self-service elevators and two stairways serviced each of the five levels, one of which was underground leading to a passageway connecting the parking building directly to the basement of the Retail store.

Construction of new buildings and adding to old ones was nothing new to Sears, so no one was surprised in 1965 when plans were announced to add two floors on Sections four and five, and two floors in new Sections 6 and 7, plus a basement in Section 7. This expansion program gave us approximately 192,000 square feet of additional space.

In 1967 the last addition was made to the main plant. Five floors were added to sections 4 and 5, bringing them up to 10 floors, and adding nearly 210,000 square feet.

In September of that year, Mr. S. W. Fry took the reins from Mr. Mieher as Memphis' fourth General Manager. He has been, and is now, active in every phase of the Memphis community. Mr. Fry has the respect and admiration of Memphis citizens and Sears employees for his extensive work with organizations such as United Way, Chamber of Commerce, Memphis Heart Association and Junior Achievement.

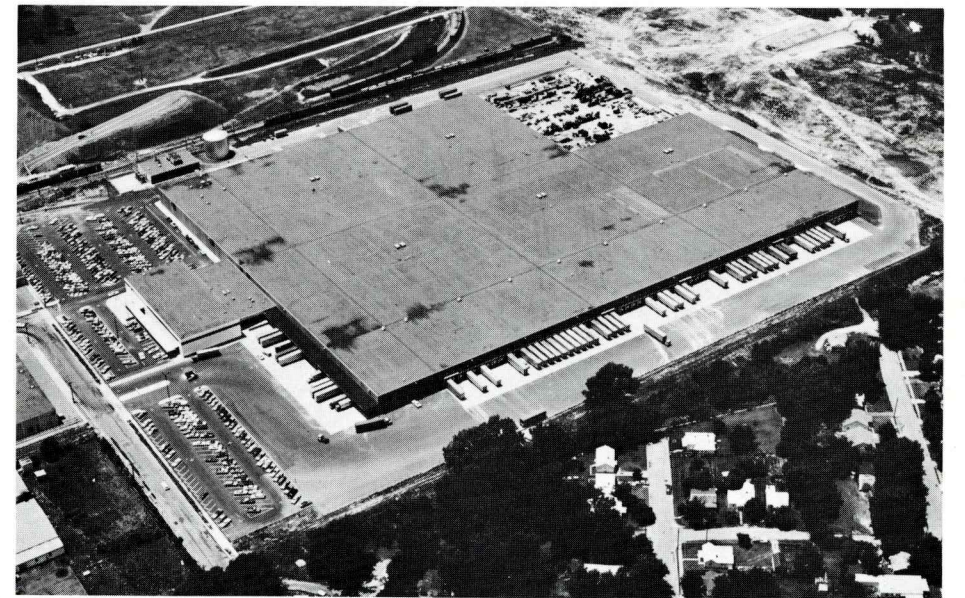
Keeping pace with the growth of this area, providing improved customer service, and to better employee working conditions, a \$10 million Catalog Order Plant Annex was completed in 1972. The structure, one of the largest single story merchandise facilities in the Mid-South, has its own Surplus Store, employee cafeteria, personnel office and medical department. Located on a 52-acre tract in the rapidly growing industrial northeast section of the city, the building itself occupies 15.7 acres with 17 acres paved truck parking and 19.3 acres reserved for future expansion. That expansion is now being planned.

This same year, the Mechanized Order Processing System was implemented in the Memphis plant. The system is used not only to process orders, but to capture information for sales, inventory and a more accurate customer index.

Not a direct part of Memphis, but



Construction methods and machinery have changed since 1927 but the steel skeleton looks the same.



This roof covers many acres and millions of dollars of merchandise.

yet indirectly affecting us, is the magnificent Sears Tower in Chicago, the world's tallest building, completed in 1973.

General Robert E. Wood vividly described the elements of character that have greatly contributed to the company success at a banquet in the Conrad Hilton Hotel in Chicago, May 4, 1950. He said, "The customer is our real employer. The moment we lose his confidence, that moment marks the beginning of disintegration of this Company. The confidence of

the American people in the values, the fairness and the honesty of Sears, Roebuck and Co. is the most precious asset this Company has. Our customer policy has been, and is, based on the theory that the overwhelming majority of the American people are honest, that liberal and prompt adjustments to old and honest customers, even if we may think such customer is wrong, are desirable as a matter of policy, that our motto of "Satisfaction Guaranteed or Your Money Back" is a real slogan, to be



faithfully observed and promptly executed. If to this policy are added real values, prompt courteous and willing service, in both Mail Order and Retail, we will retain our present customers and add new ones all the time. "Only second in importance to our customer is our employe. On the treatment of them and our policy toward them rests much of the future success of the Company. It goes without saying that the first element is the pay envelope, that we must always pay wages and salaries equal to or better than any other Retailer in the country. In addition to the pay envelope, there must be as liberal or more liberal employe benefits than any other large corporation in the country; group insurance, paid vacations, sickness and hospitalization benefits, stock options or stock purchase plans for our key men, and last and greatest of all, our Profit Sharing and Pension Fund which enables our older employes to retire as small capitalists."

"We must always consider our



Sears stands in Memphis today as a monument to good basic customer relations, honesty, and community involvement.

employes as individual human beings, with personalities of their own. I believe there is no limit to what can be accomplished by a force of employes who are given an opportunity for self-expression, who

have faith in their leaders, who believe not only in their ability, but in their fairness and justice, and who in return give of their best, freely and willingly. If all of Sears is animated by this spirit, nothing can stop us."

## Moments To Remember

### General Managers



W.L. Acroyd  
1927 to 1952



A.I. Davies  
1952 to 1960



W.C. Mieher  
1960 to 1967



S.W. Fry  
1967 to -



When Sears celebrated its tenth anniversary in 1937 the following were present for the picture. First row (left to right): Lucille Melton, Adelaide Marriott, Roberta Parrish, Miriam Davis, Evelyn Callicott, Louise Clements, Lucille Moore, Susie West. Second row: Oliver Cook, Hazel Cooper, Birdie Meek, Marjorie Tant, Dorothy Dykema, Ora Smithson, Jennie Byall, Ruby Bringle, J.W. Donnell. Third row: Robert Brewton, J.M. Boone, J.H. Carney, W.C. Cooke, Jack Byrne, W.R. McCalla, Paul Sudbury, Hall Jennings, W.C. Pierce, Julian Curry. Fourth row: Howard Myers, Walter White, E.S. Williams, T.A. Hicks, Wayne Hanson, Charlie Reid, J.S. Landrum, Frank Hemmen, W.C. Mieher, Floyd Palmer.



In 1947 the following employees were present for the twentieth anniversary picture. Front row (left to right): R.J. Shepard, H.W. Myers, Ruby Bringle, Birdie Meek, Miriam Davis, Jennie Byall, J.H. Carney, E.K. Hague. Second row: J.W. Donnell, C.A. Cedarblade, Jack Tucker, Dr. D.H. James, Bill Pierce, Jack Byrne, Dell Berg. Third row: Bill Williams, Frank Hemmen, Wayne Hanson, Sam Drosihn, J.W. McLaughlin, W.C. Mieher, E.S. Tate.





Ten of the 37 employees who were present for the tenth anniversary picture were again photographed in 1957 and are as follows. Front row (left to right): Miriam Davis, Birdie Meek, Jennie Byall, Ruby Bringle. Back row: Wayne Hanson, W.C. Cooke, Jack Byrne, W.C. Miehler, T.A. Hicks, Ray McCalla.



This year we were able to bring back a group of employees from 1927 for a small reunion and pictures once again on the front steps. First row (left to right): Mrs. Ruby (Bringle) Turrell, Mrs. Louise Clements, Mrs. Dorothy (Dykema) Doss, Miss Jennie Byall, Mrs. Evelyn Callicott. Second row: Dr. D.H. James, R.J. Shepard, J.P. Landrum, E.K. Hague, W.R. McCalla, Oliver Cook. Third row: E.L. Seymour, Floyd Palmer, S.E. Drosihn, Wayne Hanson, J.P. Byrne. Fourth row: W.M. Pierce, Julian Curry, J.W. Donnell, Robert Brewton.



It could not be said that these employees were riding in comfort, but in 1900 it was certainly in style.



Sears 1911 Model "H" automobile was priced at a moderate price of \$365.00. No radio, heater or air conditioner.

**Our \$3.35 Banquet Lamp.**

**No. 2T933** This beautiful lamp, with the latest design of brass collar at top of bowl, is one of the latest designs of the season. The base is set on solid cast brass burner. Takes No. 2 Rochester chimney and round wick. The globe is 10 inches in diameter, and the lamp stands 24 inches high. The beautiful hand decoration consists of natural colored flowers and basket scroll on delicately tinted background. The lamp is packed securely for shipment. Weight, 25 pounds. Price.....\$3.35

All our lamps are carefully packed to insure safe delivery.

**Latest Design Banquet Lamp.**

This latest design Banquet lamp would add glamor to any room at a price easy on the purse.



Just a reminder that it wasn't always easy and simple to record messages for future reference.

**OUR PRICE OF \$15.45** on this extra representative sample of the actual cost of material and labor to you. The actual cost of material and labor to you is \$15.45. The actual cost of material and labor to you is \$15.45. The actual cost of material and labor to you is \$15.45.

**THE FRAME** is made of the very best hardwood, beautifully finished and polished, and in every point of construction has been given that we desire in furniture. The actual cost of material and labor to you is \$15.45.

**EACH PIECE** of this beautiful parlor set has sprung from the same high quality of material and labor. The actual cost of material and labor to you is \$15.45.

**IN THE MAKING OF UPHOLSTERED FURNITURE**

**IF YOU WANT** a complete parlor set, you will find it in the Sears Catalog. The actual cost of material and labor to you is \$15.45.

**THIS FIVE-PIECE SET** . . . consists of a large sofa, 48 inches long, 34 inches wide, and 34 inches high. The actual cost of material and labor to you is \$15.45.

**IT IS BEAUTIFUL IN DESIGN**, a style that has been in large vogue and found in the best retail stores. The actual cost of material and labor to you is \$15.45.

**ABOUT THE FREIGHT**, it is a weight, when packed for shipment, about 75 pounds. The freight will be added to the price of the set. The actual cost of material and labor to you is \$15.45.

**UPHOLSTERING** . . . We upholster this set with the materials we used before. The actual cost of material and labor to you is \$15.45.

**PRICES FOR COMPLETE SETS**

Set	Upholstered in	Price
No. 170150	Upholstered in	\$15.45
No. 170151	Upholstered in	\$15.45
No. 170152	Upholstered in	\$15.45
No. 170153	Upholstered in	\$15.45
No. 170154	Upholstered in	\$15.45
No. 170155	Upholstered in	\$15.45
No. 170156	Upholstered in	\$15.45
No. 170157	Upholstered in	\$15.45
No. 170158	Upholstered in	\$15.45
No. 170159	Upholstered in	\$15.45
No. 170160	Upholstered in	\$15.45
No. 170161	Upholstered in	\$15.45
No. 170162	Upholstered in	\$15.45
No. 170163	Upholstered in	\$15.45
No. 170164	Upholstered in	\$15.45
No. 170165	Upholstered in	\$15.45
No. 170166	Upholstered in	\$15.45
No. 170167	Upholstered in	\$15.45
No. 170168	Upholstered in	\$15.45
No. 170169	Upholstered in	\$15.45
No. 170170	Upholstered in	\$15.45

The Sears Catalog displayed many beautifully designed pieces of furniture.





Application Blanks - take one, sit down and fill out, then bring it to the information desk. The "good old" days when everything was simple.



The cafeteria serving lunch about thirty years ago.



A refreshment truck visited each floor twice each day so that employees did not have to leave their working space for snacks.



Mr. Ray Lumm mans the information booth in the original lobby at the Watkins Street entrance.



The 11th floor conference room prior to the 1953 remodeling.



Mr. S.W. Fry, General Manager, is pictured here with his staff. Standing left to right, is H.R. Emmons, Merchandise Superintendent, W.P. Hickman, Operating Superintendent, A.E. Litton, Staff Assistant D/132, C.D. Cole, CMDC Controller, and F.L. Stearns, Personnel Manager.

The history of Sears in Memphis with its growth and achievements reflects the incredible contribution of literally thousands of conscientious, loyal and dedicated people who willingly applied their efforts, vision, imagination and skills toward the remarkable success accomplished. Current records manifest that this same spirit of dedication is unmistakably alive today and that future history will show a continuation of excellence and achievement.



